



Education for Ministry is a relatively new program at Elmwood Jail in Santa Clara County, California. Photo: Katy Dickinson

Inmates Explore Faith, Life Through Education for Ministry

BY KEVIN CUMMINGS

Education for Ministry groups primarily meet in churches, homes, or the occasional coffee shop, but since the late 1990s, a small number of EfM groups have gathered in prisons. Currently, five prisons host weekly

EfM meetings, along with one jail in California. The four-year EfM program, based at the School of Theology in Sewanee, Tennessee, includes study in the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, church history, theology, ethics, and spiritual formation for personal ministry in the world.

From the Mountain visited the Pennsylvania State Correctional Institution at

Graterford, a maximum-security prison about 45 minutes northwest of Philadelphia, to sit in with one of those EfM groups and learn more about prisoner experiences with the program. The magazine also spoke to mentors of two other groups for inmates.

Graterford is home to more than 3,000 inmates and every Monday about

a dozen of them crowd into a small room just off the chapel for their EfM meeting, while a guard sits in a connected space. One of the inmates, Bobby, a skinny man in a white-t-shirt wearing tinted glasses, is a recent EfM graduate who now acts as an unofficial co-mentor of the Graterford group. (Prison rules prohibit reporting an inmate's last name or details of their crimes.)

About a week before this meeting, Bobby's 26-year-old brother shot and killed their 28-year-old brother in Philadelphia. When grief kept Bobby from EfM after the shooting, the other group members went to the chapel to find and com-

fort him—they have formed a brotherhood of their own in this group. Bobby said without EfM he wouldn't have the support he needs to withstand his grief and speak about his faith.

"I don't think four years ago, not only me, but my family also, could have stayed as strong as we did," Bobby said. "What I'm trying to say is, I was able to express my faith to my family on Saturday night. And I wrote a letter to my brother who died. And one of the things that I promised him was that I would prepare my family for the after-life. That's going to be a work in progress, so without EfM I don't know that I would have been able to express or articulate the words to bring my family into the faith."

Amir, known as "Chief" to his friends, is another inmate and recent EfM graduate. He said the program also helps him communicate with his family and friends who have strayed from church. Being able to articulate beliefs and building a stronger Christian foundation are common themes amongst the group. They also said they are better able to listen to people of other faiths in a prison with a large percentage of both Muslims and Christians. Compassionate listening is a cornerstone of the program.

"Just because you say something I don't like, doesn't mean I can't learn," said Chuck, an inmate with a gray goatee and frequent laugh. This group laughs often, they preach, they



Above: Bishop Mary Gray-Reeves and Deacon Robert Seifert of the Episcopal Diocese of El Camino Real visit the Education for Ministry program at Elmwood Jail in Santa Clara County, California. Photo: Katy Dickinson. Below: Inmates work in a cell block inside Graterford Prison, about 45 minutes northwest of Philadelphia. Graterford is one of five prisons in the country with an Education for Ministry program. Photo: Kevin Cummings

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testify, and tease one another with a natural camaraderie.

"That's what family does," said Jonathon, a young inmate with horn-rimmed glasses who made coffee for the rest of the group. A pile of sugar packets and bags of instant coffee sat in front of him as he heated water in an old tea-kettle. Chicago, another inmate, made sure they had Miss Ginny's favorite, a

mixture they blend from coffee at the commissary.

Miss Ginny is Virginia Slichter, an affable retired nurse who mentors the group. She's not allowed to hug or be hugged by group members and for security reasons can't have any communication with the inmates when she leaves the prison after each meeting. Karen Meridith, EfM executive director, said being an EfM leader in prison presents a number of challenges.

"Being the mentor to a prison group is a very specific ministry," she said, "and the prison

mentors work hard to raise funds and develop ongoing support from local congregations and their dioceses. The mentors include lay and ordained persons.

"Prison groups are important to EfM's mission to help participants, 'discover and exercise our gifts for ministry where we live and work,'" she added.

Slichter is in her eighth year as a mentor at Graterford. "I was scared; I'd never been in a men's prison before, much less a maximum security prison," she

said about her first visit. The prisoners, all African American at the time, stood up when she first walked in. “How do you feel about having a white woman as a mentor?” she asked them. A prisoner spoke up, “Miss Ginny, everybody needs a momma.”

“It was kind of love at first sight,” she said.

She usually doesn’t know what crimes the men in the group have committed, but sometimes the stories come out in the spiritual autobiographies required in EfM.

“It’s not important to me what they have done; it’s who they are that’s important,” she said. “Most of them are long-termers so I know they’re not in there for stealing bubble gum. But I feel safer in that room than I do in a lot of other places in my life.”

Calvin, 68, recently graduated from EfM but continues coming to the meetings. He has been in prison since 1980 and is serving life after initially being sentenced to death row. The lone Muslim in the group, he said other Muslims in prison have made “difficult statements” to him about being part of a Christian program. As a follower of Louis Farrakhan, he believes labels and institutions shouldn’t hinder people from interacting with others of different beliefs.

“When you step outside of EfM and you are faced with trauma, adversity, hatreds, prejudices, and biases, it literally forces you to reach for something to defend your system of beliefs or system of principles,” he said. “Being a Muslim I have something to reach for, but as an EfM member that gives me something else to reach for because my family was Christian; they were Baptist. But the real test is being able to stand or to withstand the barbs and the sharp jabs from people that don’t understand.”

On the same side of the table at the meeting sat Calvin’s son, Shawn, who is a Christian. Shawn has been in prison for 12 years and didn’t have much of a relationship with his father until they were locked up together and started attending the same EfM class.

Federal Prison Camp

At the women’s Federal Prison Camp in Alderson, West Virginia, William Strange is in his 19th year as mentor

of possibly the longest-running EfM prison program. Participants first started meeting there in 1998.

Strange, a Catholic deacon who repaired IBM computers for 30 years, said his group averages four openings per year with about 35 applicants. The inmates fill out a questionnaire before the interview and then Strange has three minutes with each applicant, where he asks two questions: “What do you want to get out of EfM?” and “Can you tell me one thing about yourself that you think might influence my decision?”

Each EfM group can have up to 12 members, who study, dissect and discuss scripture and beliefs, and reflect theologically.

“I have always felt privileged to witness the women grow to know themselves and their relationship with each other and God,” Strange said. “We become a strong Christian family that supports and prays for each other. I see in these women, even with all our faults, what I believe is a small hint of what the Church should be.”

Strange does not accept a stipend for his work, which helps reduce program tuition for prisoners; the Episcopal Diocese of West Virginia pays for the remainder. The women also earn education credits for the program.

“One strength of our group is its multitude of faith expressions. Over the years we’ve had women raised in both Jewish and Islamic homes. They added immeasurably to our understanding of the lessons and ourselves,” he noted.

The theological reflections involved in the program have the greatest direct impact on the inmates’ lives. “They know that they get in trouble when they react to situations, but the theological reflections have taught them to stop and take a moment to ask, ‘What does my faith call me to do here?’” Strange said.

EfM groups are confidential, meaning that members are not allowed to discuss other people’s conversations outside of the meeting. Strange noted that in 19 years, he doesn’t know of a single incident where the group’s trust was violated.

“Naturally, confidentiality is essential but it is even more so in prison where there are very few secrets,” he said. “There have been women in the group who have been

withdrawn and fearful of revealing much about themselves and full of anger, who over time become open and confident.”

Elmwood Jail

Elmwood Jail in Santa Clara County, California, is the only jail in the country with an EfM group. Prison is defined as a place to house prisoners for long-term sentences, five years or more. Jail is where prisoners are housed for five years or less, or while they await trial or sentencing. Because prisoners in jail are released or transferred often, it is more difficult to maintain consistency. The EfM program at Elmwood, which started in March 2016, began with 10 students and was down to seven by July, with one inmate released during the middle of a meeting. In November, EfM at Elmwood started its second term with four student inmates who had completed the first year, plus six new students.

Katy Dickinson, a Silicon Valley entrepreneur, is the mentor at Elmwood. Dickinson said many of the students were Catholics as children and some are former cult members.

“They are newly re-engaged with Christianity,” she said, “and are very curious and very careful readers of the Bible.”

Dickinson testified as a character witness for one EfM student who was facing serious charges. She said she saw positive changes in the inmate and his engagement with the material. That inmate was facing life without parole and was sentenced to 30 years—which he and Dickinson saw as a victory.

“His ministry is going to be in prison, but so was Paul’s,” she said.

The students don’t have access to the Internet, so Dickinson will do research for them and come back with handouts on topics like the Crusades, the Book of Amos, Tertullian, or the Oxford Martyrs. The inmates do have a journal, dictionaries, EfM materials, and copies of the Book of Common Prayer.

“Jail can be a very depressing place,” she said. “They need to know there’s a community that cares about them and is praying for them.” The community behind EfM at Elmwood Jail includes the St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church (Saratoga, California), the Correctional Institutions Chap-



Women's Federal Prison Camp in Alderson, West Virginia, is home to one of the longest running EfM programs. Photo: Federal Bureau of Prisons

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laincy, and Bishop Mary Gray-Reeves of the Diocese of El Camino Real. The bishop recently visited the EfM group at Elmwood program.

Dickinson, who teaches mentoring to professionals, as well as to participants of TechWomen (a program of the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs), said her students at Elmwood Jail have limited prospects for future success in life, so the small victories along the way are valuable. She writes in her blog that some of those victories include inmates earning their GED, improving relationships with their family, and being accepted into a program to help them re-enter society.

Blessings at Graterford

During the two hours of their meeting at Graterford, the inmates quoted from the Bible. They talked about Scripture imposing subservience on women and delved into the symbolism in Revelations. They talked about prison and the challenges of life after prison, although most will never leave.

Terry, 31, told the group about how he struggled to read prior to joining EfM. When we stepped into the chapel after the meeting, Terry, who is serving 20 to 40 years, was less sure of himself than he was with the group. He was polite and soft spoken, but his eyes were gentle and a bit worried.

“I was nervous, there was a fear over me,” he said about joining the group. “I came down here one day and I saw how intelligent everybody was and the fellowship in the group. I wanted that. I said, ‘Listen, I have trouble reading but I would love to be part of this group,’ and they accepted me. Not only did they accept me, but they inspired me. They changed my ‘I can’t read’ to ‘I can read.’ I wasn’t shy to ask for help; I wasn’t shy to read in front of them. I stumble and I’m still not perfect.”

Slichter noted that a number of the EfM members are well educated with sev-

eral having earned a bachelor’s or master’s degree through Villanova University while in prison.

“Graterford is a monastic community; it has a monastic feel to it. They joke that they even dress alike,” Slichter noted.

In June 2016, six of the students at Graterford graduated from the EfM program. Meridith attended the ceremony, which she said was an honor.

“I found the culture of the prison system a little daunting, dehumanizing,” she said. “Yet the group in the chapel was joy-filled and much larger than I was expecting: graduates, other group members, friends and relatives from inside the prison and out, supporters from area congregations and the diocese filled a significant number of seats.”

The men in the program planned the ceremony, which included prayer, music, and testimony from each graduate, she said.

“They were thoughtful, articulate, passionate about how faith had transformed their lives; I was moved,” Meridith said. “We say the real mission of EfM is transformation, and here before me was the fruit of truly transformed lives. Most of these men will never again live outside prison walls, yet they were clear that through EfM they have found meaning in the lives they will continue to live there.”

Because most of the inmates in EfM at Graterford grew up fundamentalist and this is their first scholarly Christian education, the first year of EfM can be difficult because it challenges their belief system, Slichter said.

Shawn is in year one and at the

meeting he was baffled by the idea that people will still have free will when they die and eternity will also not involve evil or choices. “I can’t wrap my mind around this. It’s not reality on this level.... All I’m going to do is worship God? It’s a beautiful concept, but really? That’s all I’m going to want to do?”

Anthony, an inmate with a strong New York area accent and a penchant for preaching, said starting the class was difficult. “It was a hard pill for me to swallow to learn that this wasn’t an actual Bible study, that instead it was a study of theology and other people’s views, and how they stand on what they believe and how they practice,” he said. “(Miss Ginny) said, ‘Listen, are you on board?’ And it’s tough, I told her, ‘I don’t know, I’m on the bus but I’m by the window and it’s open.’”

The group talked about not getting caught up in the details in the Bible that may not have really happened. “You eat the meat and spit out the bones,” William, another inmate, said. “The most important thing is don’t get choked on the bones.”

A number of the inmates say they have found peace in prison and EfM is a strong component of that tranquility. Bobby, a consummate volunteer for prison programs, said EfM is the glue that holds his life together.

“For me and the situation that I’m in, I can actually say that I’m content. Now, a lot of people might misconstrue that and say, ‘What do you mean, you’re content in prison? That doesn’t make sense, it’s not supposed to be.’ But I’m in a situation where I’m thriving in prison because I found peace with God.”

Meridith said EfM plans to add more prison groups in other institutions, when possible, but it is difficult to have a standard mentor-training program when rules at prisons vary. She noted that she’d like to see a network of EfM prison mentors to help facilitate training.